A group affair: understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali

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Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework and the methodological approach used in this study. This study contributes to the field through the analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 suspected violent extremist offenders imprisoned in Mali, as well as with 76 professionals (both Malian and international) who work in Mali on terrorism. It seeks to 'deconstruct' the process of involvement using a narrative approach to empricial data through which the elements of involvement are analysed on the micro, meso and macro level. The exploratory nature of this research will be discussed, with a specific focus on the use of narrative interviews as a method to aid our understanding of the factors at play in involvement in terrorism. An overview of the methods will be provided, detailing the case selection, the research sample and the representativeness of the sample. The interview procedures (including the setting, the role of the researcher and practicalities such as recording and taking notes) will be discussed including potential biases resulting from the chosen methodology. Finally, given the vulnerable position of the subjects and the sensitivity of the data that can potentially be gathered from a prison population, the ethics paragraph addresses the legal, regulatory, and ethical aspects of this study.

3.2 The present research

To increase our understanding of terrorism involvement in a Malian context, the current study explores the narrative accounts of a number of individuals charged as violent extremist offenders who (are suspected of having participated) in jihadist/terrorist organisations in Mali between 2011 and 2018 as well as the perspectives of professionals who work in Mali on terrorism. In this section, the exploratory nature of this research will be discussed, with a specific focus on the use of narrative interviews as a method to aid our understanding of the factors at play in involvement in terrorism. This research will use narrative interviews to identify how individuals labelled as violent extremist offenders (VEOs) in the Malian prison context construct and evaluate their personal experiences before and during imprisonment through narratives. For the interviews with professionals, both focus group and semi-structured individual interviews were used.

As the title suggests, this thesis aims to deconstruct the process involvement in terrorism in Mali. The process of deconstructing refers to the discovery of the context and the identification of the constitutive elements or factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism; literally exploring a research topic or problem.[262] The exploratory approach ensures that "[researchers] are concerned with generating information about unknown aspects of a phenomenon."[263] In this study, interview data forms the foundation that grounds the analysis. This method implies engaging with individuals who have been labelled as terrorists by their national authorities. As critical terrorism studies scholar Jackson notes, "acts of 'terrorism' and even the existence of 'terrorist' groups are typically only one small part of a broader set of contentious political struggles and conflicts."[264] As a result, the researcher must work within the established legal framework within which the individual has been charged with or sentenced for terrorism, while at the same time being extremely careful and

[262] Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', 1.
[263] Teddlie, C. and Tashakkori, A. (2009) *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research.* Los Angeles, London: SAGE.
[264] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 14.

awareness of the inherently political nature of such a label.[265] An exploratory research approach thus offers a logical starting point for conducting this study in line with these considerations.

3.3 Taking a narrative approach

Researchers from various disciplines in the social sciences have long advocated for the importance of the study of narratives.[266] In the 1980s, narrative theory took a turn beyond the field of literary studies and linguistics as Theodore Sarbin published the first psychological perspective on narratives titled *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct.* Presented as a counterargument to the – in his view – dominant "mechanical" approach in psychology, he insisted that "In giving accounts of ourselves or of others, we are guided by narrative plots. Whether for formal biographies or autobiographies, for psychotherapy, for self-disclosure, or for entertainment, we do much more than catalogue a series of events. Rather, we render the events into a story."[267] Narrative theory holds that we live in a storied world and our lives are lived through the continuous creation and exchange of stories.[268]

In 2006, Dan McAdams published a book titled *The Redemptive Self* in which he took the debate a step further by arguing not just for the importance of narratives or stories in life, but stating that narratives actually "(…) guide behaviour in every moment, and frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future."[269] Based on his findings, he and his research team developed the research method of "life-story interviews." Life stories are individual narratives through which a person makes sense of his or her life. A typical life-story interview takes about 1.5 to 2 hours, and will have a person describe his or her life as if they were outlining chapters, starting with their earliest childhood memories and ending in the here and now.[270] In a life-story interview, the interviewee usually underlines the importance of a number of crucial events and describes those in a very detailed way (the big move to the unknown city, complete with tales of the moving team, and the car trouble along the way). The life-story interview can also include a number of high and low points, as well as turning points in the individuals' life.

Criminologists Cid and Martí, in their research with prisoners, expanded on the role of life stories and turning points in the life of individual offenders.[271] Following Sampson and Laub, and Maruna, they used the narrative approach and thematic content analysis to identify how interviewees evaluated their lives and constructed their narratives. While this thesis does not make use of life story interviews, it does adopt the narrative approach: the interviews conducted provide insight in the involvement of the individuals up until the point of the interview –they do not hold predictive power for future involvement or desistance.

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[265] Jackson, R. (2007). The core commitments of critical terrorism studies. *European political science*, *6*(3), 244-251.

[266] D. Jean Clandinin and Vera Caine, 'Narrative Inquiry', in *Reviewing Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Routledge, 2013), 178–91.

[267] Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (Praeger, 1986), 23.

[268] Freeman Mark, 'Rewriting the Self: History', *Memory, Narrative*, 1993; see also R. Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Investigating Life-Stories: Personal Narratives in Pastoral Psychology', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 21, no. 4 (1993): 277–87.

[269] Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live by-Revised and Expanded Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[270] Robert Atkinson, 'The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry', *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, 2007, 224–45.

[271] José Cid and Joel Martí, 'Turning Points and Returning Points: Understanding the Role of Family Ties in the Process of Desistance', *European Journal of Criminology* 9, no. 6 (2012): 603–20.

While Pemberton and Aarten's call[272] to use narrative approaches when studying terrorism seems to overlook some of the existing narrative research within terrorism studies, it is nevertheless a welcome sentiment. When it comes to narrative research on terrorism, the majority of studies have focused on the content of terrorist (auto)biographies or self-narratives. This includes for example political scientist Altier et al. who identified and coded the occurrence of biographic incidents and episodes.[273] Other researchers have examined autobiographical texts from an ideological perspective, i.e. to reveal what they reveal about how terrorists think ideologically. Examples include research by Ramsay and Marsden who used a narrative approach to analyse two jihadist speeches by the prominent ideologues Adam Gadahn and Anwar al-Awlaki[274] and a study of ideolgoical attractions of terrorism by Cottee and Hayward.[275] Colvin and Pisiou applied a specific strand of narrative research, neutralization theory, to German right wing convicts' self-narratives.[276] Sandberg used narrative criminology to study Norwegian terrorist Breivik's personal manifesto.[277] Hearty analysed competing narratives of "Violent Dissident Irish Republican" activities.[278] And Braddock and Horgan adopted a narrative approach to explore the potential of counternarratives to affect change in beliefs and attitudes and reduce support for terrorism.[279] Most of these studies have moved beyond studying propaganda or terrorist biographies and specifically look at the importance of the narrative aspect – through the analysis of written (books, biographies) as well as oral (interviews) text to understand individuals' personal experiences of engaging in terrorism.

However, adopting a narrative approach in research warrants a further exploration of what a narrative is exactly, why the concept of a narrative is important and what impact it can have. And, as Graef, da Silva and Lemay-Hebert argue in their introduction to a special issue on using narrative approaches in terrorism studies, while using a narrative approach has become more popular in the field, many terrorism researchers do not necessarily critically evaluate the methodological implications of that approach.[280] Partially, this is a result of the different disciplinary lenses adopted in terrorism studies while the concept of narrative originates in the field of literary studies.[281]

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[272] Pemberton and Aarten, 'Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration', 12.
[273] Altier, Mary Beth, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood. "In their own words? Methodological considerations in the analysis of terrorist autobiographies." *Journal of strategic security* 5, no. 4 (2012): 85-98.
[274] Gilbert Ramsay and Sarah Victoria Marsden, 'Radical Distinctions: A Comparative Study of Two Jihadist Speeches', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 3 (2013): 392–409.
[275] Cottee, Simon, and Keith Hayward. "Terrorist (e) motives: The existential attractions of terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 12 (2011): 963-986, p. 946.
[276] Sarah Colvin and Daniela Pisoiu, 'When Being Bad Is Good? Bringing Neutralization Theory to Subcultural Narratives of Right-Wing Violence', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018, 1–16.
[277] Sveinung Sandberg, 'Are Self-Narratives Strategic or Determined, Unified or Fragmented? Reading Breivik's Manifesto in Light of Narrative Criminology', *Acta Sociologica* 56, no. 1 (2013): 69–83.
[278] Kevin Hearty, 'From "Former Comrades" to "near Enemy": The Narrative Template of "Armed Struggle" and Conflicting Discourses on Violent Dissident Irish Republican Activity (VDR)', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2016): 269–91.
[279] Braddock and Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism'.
[280] Josefin Graef, Raquel da Silva, and Nicolas Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), 1.
[281] Simon Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts', *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 3 (2019): 233.

3.4 Defining narratives

Despite the increased attention that has been paid to narrative approaches, the concept of *a narrative* remains elusive and there is no single, commonly agreed on definition of the concept. When narrative is used, it is frequently conceptualised as a synonym for ideology, belief or worldview. A narrative, however, is not necessarily one of these things. In this thesis, McAdams' definition of life stories is used to define narratives as "psychological constructions, co-authored by the person himself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning."[282] As such, these narratives are based on biographical facts but they do not mirror them as the individual selectively attributes meaning to those facts. This "meaning-making capability" (talking about growth, interpreting events in one's life and what they mean to an individual) is a capability that develops across adolescence, according to McLean and Pratt.[283]

Despite the lack of a commonly accepted definition of narrative, there is more agreement as to what are some of the characteristics or central features of narrative. First of all, many narrative researchers distinguish between "stories" on the one hand, as "merely a recounted sequence of events", and "narratives" as "accounts of events that require some level of organisation, plotting and interpretation on behalf of the narrator."[284] This dichotomy between story and narrative also unveils an underlying assumption, namely that narratives are based on events that have taken place in some objective reality that can be known through an individual's subjective interpretation of those events. In other words, to talk about a narrative implies that an event, however abstract, must have taken place.

In terms of what narrative *does*, it is essentially an instrument that enables an individual to organise, plot and interpret these events or incidents and place them in a specific order of time. In that sense, a narrative goes beyond mere description, it also provides a specific point of view, one that aims to justify or explains what, how and why events have happened.[285] That is where a narrative also functions as a vessel for meaning-making; meaning is attributed to specific events through presenting a narrative.[286] This requires a level of symbolic work on behalf of the author or presenter of the narrative in detailing an event or order of events as they took place.[287]

In a recent study on the narrative approach in terrorism studies, Copeland writes that different disciplinary understandings of narrative – specifically within narrative criminology – provide a good starting point for scholars of terrorism to aspire to.[288] He specifically references how criminologists Presser and Sandberg have conceptualised narratives in their handbook on narrative criminology.[289] Their starting point is the assumption that "human lives exist somewhere, independent of narrative description"[290] and that narratives provide a subjective interpretation of these lives or the events in them as they happened and the context

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[282] Dan P. McAdams, 'The Psychology of Life Stories.', *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100.
[283] Kate C. McLean and Michael W. Pratt, 'Life's Little (and Big) Lessons: Identity Statuses and Meaning-Making in the Turning Point Narratives of Emerging Adults.', *Developmental Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2006): 714.
[284] Chatman, S. (1975). Towards a theory of narrative. *New literary history*, *6*(2), 295-318, p. 295.
[285] Squire, C., Andrews, M., Davis, M., Esin, C., Harrison, B., Hyden, L. C., & Hyden, M. (2014). *What is narrative research?*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Polletta, F. (2009). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
[286] Polletta, F., Chen, P. C. B., Gardner, B. G., & Motes, A. (2011). The sociology of storytelling. *Annual review of sociology*, *37*, 109-130.
[287] Chatman, S. (1975). Towards a theory of narrative. *New literary history*, *6*(2), 295-318, p. 296.
[288] Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts'.
[289] Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime*, vol. 17 (NYU Press, 2015).
[290] Presser, Lois. "Collecting and analyzing the stories of offenders." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 21, no. 4 (2010): 431-446, p. 434.

they occurred within. All in all, narrative then serves partially as a record of – partially as an interpretation of experience. That also brings with it the issue of veracity or as Hopkins puts it: "the perennial question of truthfulness and authenticity in memoir-writing has coloured the social scientific reception for this type of source material."[291]

Presser emphasises the constitutive aspect of narratives arguing that rather than being just post hoc justifications – they shape experience. Because as humans we live in a storied world – subjective interpretation of that world is really the only means available to us to know that reality. This perspective also mitigates the wish or belief that a personal narrative will "always be the same in each retelling despite the dynamic nature of human life."[292] To the contrary, given the ever-changing nature of experiences, the narratives of how we understand these experiences must logically change with it. In line with this, Presser and Sandberg emphasise the idea that "stories *do something* – that is they are always told for different purposes or audiences – and this inevitably influences how they are narrated."[293]

Narratives are on the one hand culturally intelligible, as they tend to reflect the norms and values within a particular society or culture. At the same time, they differentiate individuals from one another through the "drawing self" – whereby one person might attribute negative events externally (it is always someone else's fault) while others might be more internally –focused in their attribution ('I made the wrong decision'). Interviews with human subjects in research are thus in essence an encounter with "the drawing self" – where the individual constructs a narrative and attributes meaning and causal linkages to the actors and events in the narrative. At the same time, "narrative scholars caution that people do not have a single identity, or even a single identity in a particular context".[294] As a result, the stories through which they construct their identities have an evolutionary nature and are not singularly but rather, jointly constructed. This thesis adopts that approach in emphasising the emergent and intersubjective quality through narrative.[295] Essentially, as Copeland writes:

> Through narrative we are able to bring our own meanings to the public domain, further renegotiating and reconstituting them. Storytelling, then, is meaning-making; in other words, individuals do not merely express meaning through stories but rather fundamentally create meaning in the process of constituting their experiences in narrative form.[296]

In an attempt to further the methodological rigor of the use of narratives in terrorism research, narrative researchers Graef and his colleagues propose a basic framework of three modes of narrative: as a lens, as data, and as a tool.[297] Specifically, they call upon researchers to clarify their conceptualisation of narratives as either "a *lens* to view the social world; as *data* that provide insights into that world; and as a *tool* for analyzing this data in a

[291] Hopkins, Stephen. *The politics of memoir and the Northern Ireland conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.
[292] Polletta, Francesca. *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 3.
[293] Presser, Lois, and Sveinung Sandberg, eds. *Narrative criminology: Understanding stories of crime*. Vol. 17. NYU Press, 2015, p.3.
[294] Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Routledge, 2012); Anna De Fina, 'Group Identity, Narrative and Self-Representations', *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics* 23 (2006): 351.
[295] Jacomijne Prins et al., 'Telling the Collective Story? Moroccan-Dutch Young Adults' Negotiation of a Collective Identity through Storytelling', *Qualitative Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2013): 81–99.
[296] Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts', 238.
[297] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*, 2.

systematic and coherent manner."[298] Applying the methodological framework proposed by Graef et al., this thesis uses the concept of narrative as both a *lens* and as *data*. A lens in the sense that narratives are viewed as the way within which we all live our lives, in storied realities where individuals organise and synthesise, make sense and attribute meaning to events in time and space. This is how they "come to know, understand and make sense of the world"[299] around them, and draw their social identities. This is an approach also taken by linguist Mieke Bal who asserts that "narrative approach as textual analysis looks at conditions of process of reception- of producing meaning and meaning is a cultural phenomenon, partaking of cultural processes. It is the condition of possibility of these processes that constitute the interest of narrative analysis".[300]

Following political scientist Wibben: "to think of experience as narrative captures the interpretative aspect inherent in any recollection of experience".[301] And "If experience can only be grasped through retrospective construction through narratives, these narratives warrant close attention."[302] I use narrative data not in the sense that through studying this narrative data I aim to discover some narrative structure or a universal plot (looking for specific story elements). Doing this is what is known as the field of narratology, a field with a long history dating back to Aristotle who proposed that the defining feature of a narrative is a good plot. This tradition is evident, for example, in linguist Jonathan Culler's work, who writes that "good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end".[303] Instead, I use data in the sense that I have collected narrative data based on oral records as the basis for my empirical investigation, in line with Polkinghorne, who states the aim of a narrative approach is "to make explicit the operations that produce (a) particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence".[304]

That means that interpreting that meaning form a text, makes the researcher a co-constructor of meaning as narrative always goes beyond what can be captured in analysis. As Gadamer writes, the question when analyzing narratives is always: "what happens beyond our willing and doing?"[305] Bal writes that interpreting narratives "although not absolutely free and arbitrary since it does, or should, interact with a text, is in practice unlimited and free".[306] That freedom of interpretation characterizes the deconstructive element in analyzing narratives as it challenges the organization of knowledge in purely binary oppositions, privileging one term over another – i.e. rational vs irrational, object vs subject, nature vs culture. When it comes to narrative as data, Bal argues that the analyst or researcher tries to uncover not *the* structure but *a* structure of the narrative "on the basis of selected events combined with other data".[307] In this study for example, the narratives of the inmate respondents are combined with the outcomes of the professional interview. In that process

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[298] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*.
[299] Margaret R. Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, 1994, 606.
[300] Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto, Buffalo* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 9.
[301] Annick TR Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Routledge, 2010), 44.
[302] Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*.
[303] Culler Jonathan, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85; cf Jonathan Culler, 'Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative', *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* 169 (1981): 169–87.
[304] Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Suny Press, 1988), 6.
[305] Gadamer, as quoted in David E. Linge, 'Editor's Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics', *Philosophical Hermeneutics, Translated by DE Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976)*, 1976, x.
[306] Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto, Buffalo*, x.
[307] Bal, 193.

"the choice of a particular combination is always intuitive" because it is impossible "to investigate everything and to make it explicit". In this study, I interpret the narratives of the prison interviews as data with the use of Thematic Content Analysis, which will be further explained in paragraph 3.8.

All in all, a narrative analysis does not provide truth or decide on quality or value of the narrative but instead, it provides insights into how certain mechanisms are used to encourage one or another meaning – meanings are the "result of the interpretation by the reader, an interpretation influenced both by the initial encounter with the text and by the manipulation of the story".[308]

3.5 Methods

3.5.1 Mali as a case study

The Malian context is unique for various reasons. First, as previously outlined, the Sahel-Maghreb region is of particular interest in terrorism research given its history, the geo-political situation, and its exposure to terrorist groups and narco-trafficking. Second, among the Sahel-Maghreb countries, Mali has been experiencing a violent conflict between various terrorist groups and the national government, which has been extended to the international level with the deployment of French troops in the country and the establishment of the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA. Third, literature and research on terrorism, its forms and connections with other crimes, is very limited and suffers from a Western bias,[309] requiring further research with a focus on local input. This study seeks to fill these gaps. Access to primary sources was facilitated through the researcher's participation in a training project in Mali, including access to individuals charged with terrorism, local and national government actors, and international institutions working in Mali. Together with a researcher from the United Nations Interregional Crime Research Institute (UNICRI), the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), represented by the researcher, was requested to conduct these interviews by DNAPES, part of the Malian Ministry of Justice. The request from the Malian government was to provide them with a description of this prison population including their demographic profiles and an analysis of their involvement in terrorism. As such, the research focus of the project (with a timeline starting in September 2016 to August 2020)[310] overlaps with the overall research question of this thesis.

3.5.2 Participant recruitment

Given that the focus of the research is involvement in terrorism, for the interviews with (suspected) terrorists it was a requirement that participants were linked to terrorism offences. As Jerrold Post, Ehud Sprinzak and Laurita Denny note in their prison-based research into motivations of terrorists: "The best way to find out the interest of terrorists [in using weapons of mass destruction] was to ask them, and this we did, with the fascinating results reported below."[311] Participants were recruited from Mali's central prison in its capital Bamako: the Central Penitentiary (*Maison Central d'Arret*, MCA), based on their label as a (suspected) VEO, a label assigned to them by the Malian authorities. This study relied on a

[308] Bal, 193.
[309] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 18; see also McDonald, 'Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies'.
[310] See ICCT's website for more information on ICCT and UNICRI's activities in Mali and the associated reports: www.icct.nl.
[311] Post, J., Sprinzak, E., & Denny, L. (2003). The terrorists in their own words: Interviews with 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists∗∗ This research was conducted with the support of the Smith Richardson Foundation. *Terrorism and political Violence*, *15*(1), 172.

combination of opportunity sampling and snowball sampling. The prison authorities were asked to select participants who were former members of groups with extreme political or religious ideologies (opportunity sapmling). At the same time, it became clear throughout the interviews that this was done in consultation with the prisoners themselves (snowball sampling).

As criminologist Carol Matfin notes, "Snowball sampling would offer the best opportunity to access those within a specific group. With snowball sampling, it is crucial to get the initial approach right and the prison grapevine should never be underestimated."[312] Participants were not required to have participated in acts of violence or illegality themselves. In their work on prison-based research, Copes et al. emphasise the importance of ensuring there is no pressure from correctional staff to participate in the interviews, as involuntary participation affects the validity and reliability of the data negatively. This goes hand-in-hand with the perception that participation might lead to obtaining certain benefits. The participants were informed of the research project beforehand by MCA's social worker, who provided a short summary of the research and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation. The prisoners were then asked who was willing to participate in the research.

The interviewees were selected based on their status as violent extremist offenders and the fact that they were all detained at MCA. Even though this specific prison population is thus not representative of the total universe of cases (of violent extremist offenders (VEOs)), research among inmates – especially this sub-population of offenders – provides a primary source of basic criminological data. Given that in Mali, all VEOs are detained in either Bamako or Koulikouro prison, the sample is representative for the population of incarcerated Malian VEOs. This resulted in a total of 30 individuals, who were 18 years or older at the time of interview, spoke French, and consented to participate.

For the interviews with professionals, participants were selected based on their work in the field of terrorism (or counterterrorism) and they were recruited using the snowball method. Individual respondents would refer us to other respondents they thought would be relevant to the research project or we would reach out to individuals that we believed could be relevant to the research. In total, 75 individuals were interviewed between September 2016 and November 2018. This group includes the 56 professionals that were interviewed in focus group interviews during two workshop sessions on violent extremism in the Malian context, and 19 semi-structured interviews with foreign individuals who work in Mali in the field of counterterrorism. The 56 professionals that were recruited through the project that was implemented by ICCT and UNICRI include prison staff; religious leaders; policymakers; and representatives from MINUSMA followed training sessions on terrorism and radicalisation in Malian prisons. The Malian group includes 23 Malian religious leaders; five representatives from MINUSMA's Justice and Corrections Sector (JCS); 15 Malian prison staff; two policymakers from the Ministries of Justice; five policymakers of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; one Judge and one General Prosecutor; three staff from DNAPES.

The group of respondents that was interviewed individually was recruited based on their work on terrorism in Mali – they were contacted directly through snowball sampling and asked for an interview on the topic. The group includes 19 respondents of which six individuals who work for MINUSMA (one from SSR sector); two from JMAC; one from ASIFU; one from UNDSS; and one from the Human Rights Affairs (HRA) section. One individual is a senior adviser within the EU Delegation to Mali, one respondent worked as a researcher at the University of Bamako and one respondent was a former US intelligence officer. Another five respondents represent four embassies (Canadian, US, Dutch, French).

[312] Matfin, Carol. 'Doing research in a prison setting.' In *Doing criminological research.* Edited by Pamela Davies, and Peter Francis, (2018) SAGE Publications Limited, 226.

And finally, I interviewed five individuals from a range of nongovernmental and civil society organisations (NGOs and CSOs), including International Alert, SNV, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Think Peace Mali, and Mercy Corps. The respondents in the international group thus represent the main foreign actors in the country as well as a number of NGOs/CSOs that work in the field of terrorism in Mali. Although the interviews with professionals do not cover the entire country and Bamako is overrepresented in the sample, this did not have a major impact on researching involvement in terrorism in Mali because the respondents all focus in their daily work on dealing with terrorism in the country – either in prison or in designing and implementing counter-terrorism (CT)-related policies. As such, they all have knowledge of and/or experience with the various terrorist groups in the country. Table 3.1 provides an overview of all research participants.

Table 3.1 – Overview of research participants

Participants	Sub-category	Number of respondents
Inmates suspected and/or sentenced for terrorism-related offenses		30
Malian respondents	*Prison staff*	15
	Religious leaders	23
	MINUSMA	5
	Ministry of Justice	2
	Ministry of Religious Affairs	5
	Judge	1
	Prosecutor	1
	DNAPES	3
	Researcher	1
	Subtotal	**56**
International respondents	*MINUSMA*	6
	EU Delegation to Mali	1
	Embassies	5
	University of Bamako	1
	Former US Intelligence Officer	1
	NGOs/CSOs	5
	Subtotal	**19**
	TOTAL	**105**

3.5.3 Research sample

Given the main research question's focus on how we can understand involvement in terrorism in Mali, the unit of analysis is the individual. While the theoretical framework includes explanations on the macro, meso, and micro level, this framework is applied to the individual experiences of involvement in terrorism in Mali. The participants in this research consist of both men charged with and/or sentenced for terrorism-related crimes (including violent and non-violent offences), incarcerated in a high-security prison, as well as individuals who work with or on the topic of terrorism in Mali. Between December 2016 and December 2018, a total number of 36 qualitative interviews with 30 VEOs were conducted in

MCA, where a total of over 200 individuals are detained based on terrorism-related charges.[313] Currently, Mali's prison authority, DNAPES, detains all arrested VEOs[314] in two prisons: MCA in Bamako or Koulikouro prison (in the greater capital region). An additional 75 interviews were conducted in focus group and individual interviews with Malian and international professionals. An overview of the research sample including information on the demographic profile of the inmates is provided in chapter five.

3.6 Semi-structured interviews

The empirical data collected for this research was gathered through conducting narrative interviews with inmates and with professionals. The inmate interviews were conducted in prison in Mali with inmates who were labelled as terrorist offenders (or *malfacteurs* in French) by the Malian government. The research includes interviews with 30 individuals, who are imprisoned in the MCA in Mali's capital Bamako. Together with UNICRI, ICCT was requested to conduct these interviews by DNAPES, part of the Malian Ministry of Justice. Thus, access to MCA and permission to conduct the interviews was guaranteed through the Minister of Justice and the Prison's Director. In total, 36 semi-structured narrative interviews with 30 (suspected) terrorists and 75 semi-structured interviews (of which 56 in focus groups and 19 individual interviews) with professionals were conducted, meaning that the interview setup was used as a general guide throughout the interviews, while at the same time creating space for the interviewees to share their own story. A semi-structured approach allows for a certain degree of flexibility when navigating through the various sensitive issues that can play a role in interviews in the prison setting or on sensitive issues like terrorism, such as biases and trust issues.[315] The interview guide presented in Annex A provides the topics that were generally covered during the interview with the suspected inmates and Annex B provides the interview outline that was used for the individual and focus group interviews with professionals.[316]

For the inmate interviews, this general structure provided the flexibility to focus on the understanding of the social reality of the interviewee by allowing the inmate room to expand on specific topics or not address specific questions.[317] For the professional interviews, the focus group interviews were guided by questions related to perceptions of terrorism and causes of radicalization in the country. For the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists, the number of interviews was determined based on saturation in the inductive coding process. Many qualitative researchers use what is referred to as 'theoretical saturation'.[318] The concept of theoretical saturation, as defined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. as 'the moment at which no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can

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[313] Mali has adopted a Counter-Terrorism Law on 23 July 2008 (Law No. 08-025) that incorporates the offences required in the international instruments against terrorism, such as offences related to civil aviation, vessels and fixed-platforms, dangerous materials, diplomatic agents, hostage-taking, financing of terrorism and nuclear terrorism.

[314] All offenders who have been arrested based on violent extremism or terrorism-related charges are detained as a group in two prisons: Maison Central d'Arret in Bamako or Koulikouro prison. The charges can vary from being a member of a terrorist group to facilitating terrorism.

[315] Donald J. Newman, 'Research Interviewing in Prison', *J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci.* 49 (1958): 127; see also Schuurman and Eijkman, 'Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources'.

[316] Jerry Wellington and Marcin Szczerbinski, *Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (A&C Black, 2007), 83–84.

[317] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford university press, 2016), 468–69.

[318] Byrne, M. 2001. Evaluating the findings of qualitative research. AORN Journal 73: 703–6; see also Fossey, E., C. Harvey, F. McDermott, and L. Davidson. 2002. Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry 36:717–32; Guest, G., A. Bunce, and L. Johnson. 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. Field Methods 18:59–82.

develop properties of the category'.[319] However, their definition applies to grounded theory research and not to exploratory research. Thus, in this thesis, I focused not on theoretical saturation but on data saturation, defined by Guest et al, as "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook".[320] More specifically, in this study, I adopted methodologist Given's definition, who defined data saturation as "the point at which additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes";[321] in line with the approach of thematic content analysis. In practice, this means that when coding interview data, I applied thematic content analysis to identify nodes, themes and domains and the point where no new themes were identified despite additional data was the point of data saturation.

While the notion of saturation has become the norm in determining sample sizes for qualitative research,[322] they do not provide much information about the actual number of interviews needed. To address that issue, Morgan and colleagues statistically examined saturation based on raw data and concluded the majority of data was produced in the first five to six interviews.[323] In the four sample categories in their study, the first ten interviews led to the identification of roughly eighty to ninety percent of themes while the next ten interviews in the sample led to very few additional themes. Other authors discussing sample sizes confirmed these findings.[324] Nonetheless, when it comes to cross-cultural research, a study by Hagaman and Wutich found that generally, a higher number of interviews is required to reach saturation.[325] They concluded that to identify common themes, fewer than 16 interviews were enough, but to identify domains or meta-themes that cut across all data categories, a minimum of 20–40 interviews were necessary. In the end, building on a review article by Guest et al,[326] I determined the overall number of interviews based on whether new themes and domains were still emerging in the coding process – which led to a total of 36 individual interviews with 30 inmates. For the interviews with professionals, the number of interviews was determined based on the access to these interviews through the project that was implemented.

3.6.1 Interview settings

For the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists, the primary research team (including myself) consisted of two (one Italian and one Dutch) females aged 29 and 30 at the start of the research in 2016. The implications of this are discussed in the next paragraphs. Throughout the research project, two other researchers assisted in conducting interviews based on their language skills (one Arab-speaking colleague) and based on gender (one participant was only comfortable talking to a male researcher). The interviews took place in the prison environment – in an office where no prison staff was present. The two researchers

[319] Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 1967. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine, p. 61.
[320] Guest, G., A. Bunce, and L. Johnson. 2006. How many interviews?, p. 65.
[321] Lisa M. Given, *100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2015), 135.
[322] Guest et al, p.5
[323] Morgan, M., B. Fischoff, A. Bostrom, and C. Atman. 2002. Risk Communication: A Mental Models Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[324] Francis, J. J., M. Johnston, C. Robertson, L. Glidewell, V. Entwistle, M. P. Eccles, and J. M. Grimshaw. 2010. What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. Psychology and Health 25:1229–45.
[325] Hagaman, A., and A. Wutich. 2017. How many interviews are enough to identify metathemes in multi-sited and cross-cultural research? Another perspective on Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) landmark study. Field Methods 29:23–41.
[326] Guest, G., Namey, E., & McKenna, K. (2017). How many focus groups are enough? Building an evidence base for nonprobability sample sizes. *Field methods*, *29*(1), see specifically the table on p. 8 for a summary of their findings.

were seated next to each other, facing the participant who was seated in a similar chair, not wearing handcuffs or being otherwise restrained. The office was adjacent to the office of the head of security, and the door between the offices was closed or nearly closed during the interviews to create an atmosphere of privacy, and due to the overall level of noise in the prison the interview could not be overheard. Due to security restrictions, the researchers were not allowed to record the interviews. Both researchers made written notes throughout the interview of everything that was said throughout the interview. These notes were then compared and transcribed right after the interviews. The average interview took 45-90 minutes. At the start of the interview, the research team and the research project were introduced by explaining the purpose of the research (gaining insight in involvement in terrorism in Mali), the background of the researchers, and interviewees were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and their participation.

All interviewees provided oral informed consent to participate prior to the interview on the basis that the outcomes would be anonymised. This is in line with similar studies done with inmates in a prison setting – for example as terrorism researcher Ann Speckard writes: "For these reasons [potential harm coming from participating in the interview for the subject], to keep everyone involved in less danger, I have made it my practice to do interviews as anonymously as possible. I never record the real names or addresses or any identifying information about those I interview so that their words cannot be linked back to them."[327] As a courtesy, the researchers offered tea and dates to the prison participants during the interview – the tea was provided by the prison authorities.

The interviews with professionals took place in many different settings, dependent on the preference of the professionals. In many cases, the interviews took place in the work environment, i.e. at a military camp, MINUSMA Headquarters, at embassies, at Ministries or at the offices of NGOs/CSOs. In some cases, the interviews were conducted in a social setting, for example in a restaurant or café, or at home. All interviews with professionals took place in Mali and in line with the prison interviews. The focus group interviews took place during training workshops in small group settings either in or outside the training venues (in hotels in Bamako). The interviews were conducted by the same research team (ICCT and UNICRI) with the majority of the professional interviews conducted by the same team mentioned above but some interviews were conducted one-on-one or with other colleagues from ICCT or UNICRI. All individual interviews were conducted with only one interviewee present whereas the focus group interviews, on average, had five to eight participants per group. For the focus group interviews, the research team always consisted of a minimum of two researchers to allow for coordinated moderation and note taking of the discussions. Where the focus group interviews were part of training workshops and took two to two and a half hours, the individual interviews varied from at minimum half an hour to two hours. Dependent on the interviewee, a short introduction was given (some of the interviewees were already aware of the topic and project we were conducting) and the interview then proceeded with a set of semi-structured questions.

3.6.2 Role of the researcher

The next two paragraphs reflect on the role of the researcher in the prison environment and the potential cultural bias, given the sensitivity of interviewing individuals in that environment, even more so when it comes to offenders labelled as terrorists in a non-Western, male prison setting. Researcher role construction in the prison environment begins at the very first moment a researcher sets foot in a prison. As argued by Schlosser: "Accompanied by a figure of authority, a researcher's presence is that of an outsider with

[327] Speckhard, A. (2009). Research challenges involved in field research and interviews regarding the militant jihad, extremism, and suicide terrorism. *Democracy and Security*, *5*(3), 200.

power. As a new and unfamiliar face on prison grounds, it is inevitable that the inmates were aware of such a presence'.[328] Therefore, before starting the research, the prison authorities were asked for specific cultural guidelines in conducting the interviews. We also asked the social worker of the prison to introduce the research project to the inmates in their cell before asking who would voluntarily participate. In the introduction of the interviews, extra care was taken to explain to the participants that the researchers have or had no affiliation with any state or local prison or ministry.

For staff and inmates alike, the role of the researcher is that of the observer and the listener. Following Alison Liebling, who wrote extensively on doing qualitative research in prison settings:[329]

> On reflection, our research enterprise was launched with all the rigor and discipline of the 'social scientific' methodology we had at our disposal: careful observation and reporting, painstakingly prepared questionnaires, patiently gather information, hours spent 'hanging out' between formally arranged interviews. Once launched, it was our judgment, intuition and creative instinct, our various abilities to connect with others and our (ethnographically inclined) 'selves', which steered us through the exercise.[330]

Similarly, in our research we often had to improvise, or judge situations in terms of rapport between the research team and the prison staff or the inmate, and creatively find ways to build a relationship to provide an open atmosphere for the interviews. Being in the field and regularly visiting the prison over a three year time period was crucial. Finding the right balance between keeping a professional distance both from the prison staff and the prisoners and investing in trust-based relationships with them proved essential. In the Malian context that translated into clearly presenting ourselves as researchers from a university as well as being transparent about both the nature of the interviews (instigated by the Malian government). At the same time, it also meant we had to explain ourselves repeatedly and patiently, time and again to the same inmates when we came back for a total of six follow up interviews, to the prison director, again at the end of any conversation, and to any new guard that was hired in between. During the prison interviews, the final question of an interviewee often was: who did you say you were exactly? Other commonly asked questions by the interviewees to the interviewers throughout the interviews related to who we were, our background (where we lived and how old we were), why we were interested in Mali and in them, and what we would do with the interview data.

Cultural and religious sensitivities were especially relevant in this research given that the participants generally maintained a strong commitment to their cultural traditions and beliefs. Cultural courtesy was displayed during the interviews, such as refraining from any form of physical contact if the inmate indicated a preference not to shake hands, and being mindful of daily routines such as prayer and meal times when scheduling interviews. During all interviews the researchers made sure to dress appropriately (modest dress), be polite and friendly, and take social cues from the participants (e.g. in case they were tired or preferred not to answer a question). As a result, while some interviews were more formal in tone, while others were more relaxed, generally speaking the interviews were conducted in a similar fashion.

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[328] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 8 (2008): 1512. See also Marco Marzano, 'Informed Consent, Deception, and Research Freedom in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (2007): 417–36.
[329] Alison Liebling, 'Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?', *Theoretical Criminology* 3, no. 2 (1999): 147–73; see also Alison Liebling, *Suicides in Prison* (Routledge, 2002); Alison Liebling, *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
[330] Liebling, 'Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?', 159.

In the professional interviews, some similar as well as different dynamics played a role compared to the prison interviews. Just as with the prison interviews, the topic of the interviews (security and terrorism) were overall sensitive topics, especially for participants working for Malian government institutions – as they generally would be inclined to defend government policies or be less open about challenges and dilemmas in formal settings with a larger audience. However, because the interviews were conducted over a time period of four years (2016 to 2020), a trust relationship had developed between the research team and the majority of the interviewees, significantly contributing to a more informal setting and to openness and honesty in the professional interviews with Malian stakeholders. The international respondents were generally more open and explicit in their analysis and assessment of the security and terrorism situation in Mali.

The biggest difference to the prison interviews was that the power relationship was much more equal and the objective of the interviews was much easier to explain. Partially this was a consequence of the existing trust relationship mentioned in the paragraph above, meaning that for the majority of the professional participants, they were already familiair with the research team and the work ICCT and UNICRI were implementing in Mali. Overall, the professional respondents were eager to provide their opinions and needed little to know extra input in the interviews to share their perspectives.

Another similarity to the prison interviews was the fact that the professional respondents were predominantly male (with 6 out of 75 respondents or 8% being female). All female respondents worked for embassies, MINUSMA or NGO/CSOs and none of the Malian respondents were female. This reflects the work field of security and terrorism where the majority of professionals – especially practitioncers - are male; even more so in non-Western contexts. In the interviews with Malian respondents, we noticed that this dynamic led – in some cases – to a setting in which the respondents were taking an approach to the interview that can be best described as 'teacher-like'. This meant that they would talk in terms of 'let me explain how it works' or 'in Mali, we do things such and so'. However, this dit not provide an obstacle to the research process as it did not hinder us in gathering information that was usfeful for the analysis.

3.6.3 Biases

A majority of prison studies highlight the researchers' outsider status.[331] Researchers hold fundamentally different perspectives on the prison environment and prison staff often question whether outsiders without relevant practitioner experience can truly understand the daily realities of prison life.[332] The outsider perspective of the research team was amplified by the fact that we were young, female, Western researchers interviewing male, non-Western individuals. Odendahl and Shaw noted that gender is an issue in many interview situations, and that female interviewers generally appear more aware of both the positive and negative

[331] Richard S. Jones, 'Uncovering the Hidden Social World: Insider Research in Prison', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 11, no. 2 (1 May 1995): 106–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/104398629501100203; Heith Copes, Andy Hochstetler, and Anastasia Brown, 'Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews', *Field Methods* 25, no. 2 (1 May 2013): 182–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X12465798; Deborah H. Drake and Joel Harvey, 'Performing the Role of Ethnographer: Processing and Managing the Emotional Dimensions of Prison Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 17, no. 5 (3 September 2014): 489–501, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.769702.

[332] Liebling, 'Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?'

influences their gender might have on the interview process.[333] Some respondents commented on the fact that we were young Western women either by asking us family-related questions such as whether we were already married and had children, or asking questions related to age and what country we came from.

One participant clearly felt uncomfortable talking to us, as demonstrated through his general avoidance to look at us and the answers he provided (either very short or evasive). However, it was not entirely clear whether this was caused by gender, age, or other factors. When we later came back with a male colleague he did not say much more in that additional interview. We did not encounter any openly sexist attitudes during the research. As noted, gender can be both a barrier and an advantage when it comes to interviewing people. Schwedler concluded on Western female researchers doing field work in non-Western contexts: "Female researchers do face many challenges, but most have less to do with gender than with examining sensitive political issues in highly repressive environments."[334] She points out that, contrary to expectations, visiting female researchers are often able to gain access to male officials and other prominent individuals more easily compared to male researchers; even in traditional patriarchal societies like the Middle East. In terrorism literature, there is also a prominence of Western female researchers doing fieldwork and interviewing terrorists. Especially noteworthy in his regard are Jessica Stern, who interviewed male terrorists in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Jordan,[335] and Ann Speckard, who did extensive fieldwork in Palestine, Chechnya, and among immigrant communities in Europe.[336] In line with this, our experience in Mali was overwhelmingly positive in terms of the willingness of inmate respondents to talk to us and their general openess during the interviews.

Nonetheless, incarcerated individuals, given the stigma that comes with being an inmate, could potentially hide or conceal particular sides of themselves out of fear of moral judgment from others.[337] As such, when trying to understand the specific context within which they live and perceive of themselves, we need to "listen to their words, and try to reconstruct their meaning in our minds, but we can never be sure about the accuracy of these transformations."[338] Within the prison environment, researcher are by definition outsiders and are perceived as such by inmates. However, as Schlosser describes, "they are also part of the identity definition and construction process when they elicit, interpret, and analyse the inmates' narratives by helping to construct both the story and the translated reality"[339]. The process of "reciprocal exposure" or "the researcher's will to be questioned by the potential

[333] Teresa Odendahl and Aileen M. Shaw, 'Interviewing Elites', in *Handbook of Interview Research*, by Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2001), 311, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588.n19.
[334] Jillian Schwedler, 'The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 03 (July 2006): 425–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909650606077X.
[335] Jessica Stern, 'Terror in the Name of God' (Ecco New York, 2003); cf Jessica Stern, 'Pakistan's Jihad Culture', *Foreign Aff.* 79 (2000): 115.
[336] Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, 'The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 429–92; cf Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, 'Talking to Terrorists', *Journal of Psychohistory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 125.
[337] Harold Garfinkel, 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies', *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 5 (1 March 1956): 420–24, https://doi.org/10.1086/221800; Erving Goffman, 'Stigma Englewood Cliffs', *NJ: Spectrum*, 1963 as quoted in; Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, 'Conceptualizing Stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 363–85.
[338] Gudmundsdottir, 1996, p. 303-304.
[339] Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates', p. 1519.

respondents"[340] was also utilised as a way to establish rapport with the inmates. During the interviews, the researchers mitigated this factor to the extent possible through asking open questions, not indicating any surprise or moral judgment in response to some of the stories that were shared, and remaining calm, polite, and friendly throughout the interviews.

The interviews were not audiotaped, as the prison authorities did not allow this. Every interview was conducted by two researchers, both taking notes on paper from the interview and transcribing the interviews in the next couple of hours into a Word document. The participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any question, pause, or cease the interview at any time. The length of the interviews was restricted by the availability of the participants, and ranged from a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes.

Interviewing inmates warrants a specific and cautious approach as the interviews took place in a restricted setting, focusing on vulnerable subjects. Taking into consideration that inmates are often stigmatised,[341] the researchers avoided questions that would have led inmates to feeling (further) stigmatised, [342] including for example explicit questions enquiring after *why* the inmate committed certain crimes. The researchers took the responsibility to design the interview in such a way that participants felt comfortable, were able to understand the questions, and that protected the interviewees' interests in the sense that they did not feel they were incriminating themselves. Throughout the research project, the researchers treated the participants with respect and patience to avoid or mitigate any reluctance to participate and to allow the research to remain truthful and honest.

At the start of the interview, it was of vital importance to establish trust between the interviewers and interviewee, in order to gather valid and reliable data from the interview.[343] Identifying or building that trust relationship was not easy as it was not something that could easily be measured. Generally, a trust relationship could only be identified through two things: willingness to talk and a sense of openness that we perceived from the inmate. Overall, contrary to our expectations, with the majority of the prison interviews we felt a trust relationship was quite quickly established.

This could be a consequence of a number of factors, including that the inmates were generally happy to be outside of their prison cells for the duration of the interview, grateful for the tea and dates provided, the fact that we were women (in an all male environment), foreign (which often seemed to spark their curiosity) and the fact that we did not press them on issues they clearly did not want to discuss. This will be elaborated upon below. However, we were not always able to develop a trust relationship (as one inmate hardly provided any answers) or only to a limited extent (two other inmates were quite succinct and evasive in their answers).

At the start of the project the researchers imagined that inmates might be concerned about the legal consequences of sharing information; or they might feel the tendency to provide socially desirable answers in order to gain favour with criminal justice officials.[344] However, interestingly, almost all prison participants did not seem at all concerned about

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[340] Marta Bolognani, 'Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological Issues in Researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10, no. 4 (1 October 2007): 279–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701546570.

[341] Schnittker, Jason, and Andrea John. "Enduring stigma: the long-term effects of incarceration on health." *Journal of health and social behaviour* 48.2 (2007): 115-130; see also Pettit, Becky, and Christopher Lyons. "Status and the stigma of incarceration: The labor market effects of incarceration by race, class, and criminal involvement." *Barriers to reentry* (2007): 203-226.

[342] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* (14) 8, December 2008, pp. 1500-1525.

[343] Copes e.a. (2012) Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews, *Field Methods,* 25(2), p. 183

[344] Ibid.

legal consequences or sharing information about themselves, even when it concerned their involvement in activities that were illegal and for which they had not been sentenced yet. To the contrary, overall the participants were very open and willing to share their personal stories, including potentially incriminating details, with the researchers.

The researchers concluded that three factors contributed to the willingness and openness of the participants. First, all prison cells (on average containing 40 to 70 inmates) in the prison within which the research was conducted, are headed by a so-called *Chef du Chambre* – or cell leader. The prison authorities had already informed the researchers of this fact and also pointed out that the researchers would only be able to conduct interviews with the authorisation of the cell leader. In practice, the first participant that was interviewed was the right-hand man of the cell leader and according to the prison staff; he was sent by the cell leader to find out who the researchers were and what the research was about. The second interview was conducted with the cell leader himself, who apparently had given his permission to the inmates in his cell to participate in the research, as no issues were encountered in finding participants after that interview.

A second, more mundane factor was the fact that a number of participants specifically mentioned that participating in the interview provided them with a welcome break from their otherwise boring daily routine, and a break from an overpopulated prison cell. Third and finally, it became clear from the interviews that the participants did not have faith in the legal process, and as a result, they did not feel it mattered whether they would or would not share their stories. This is in line with earlier research by Copes and colleagues, who concluded that inmates who participated in interviews stated to have benefitted from their participation, for instance because the interview offered break in their daily routine as well as a chance to talk to strangers.[345]

Aside from potential stigmatisation and willingness to participate, another concern at the outset of the research project was the chance that inmates would not be honest or provide socially desirable answers. Even more so in the context of the research sample as the majority of inmates was still on remand, awaiting trial, and therefore might not be willing to share information with the researchers.[346] However, as described above, almost all participants were very willing to share their stories, including potentially incriminating facts about themselves, and therefore the researchers concluded the social desirability bias could largely be discarded. Honesty and truth, however, were more difficult concepts to assess. It is important to note here that we did not conduct interviews expecting *the truth* from participants.

This research is grounded in the narrative approach where the stories that are shared are based on biographical facts but were not viewed as *reality* but rather as psychological constructions where participants build their own narratives based on a combination of facts and meaning making. As such, the greatest benefit of interviews with (former) extremists lies in their ability to provide glimpses into the world around them and their own role in it and the meaning they attribute to their participation in a terrorist group. In other words, the main value of the interview data gathered in this research project lies more in what it says about the interviewees, rather than in the factual accuracy of the stories they provide.[347] Nonetheless, the researchers cross-checked factual information provided in the interviews (such as age, ethnicity, charge) with the prison registry and – where possible – checked inmates' stories with open source data (for example the presence of certain violent extremist groups in specific regions where inmates claimed they had been involved with a group, or names of group leaders that were mentioned in interviews) and found no inconsistencies.

[345] Copes, Hochstetler, and Brown, 'Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews', 185.
[346] Ibid, p. 188-189
[347] Horgan, "Interviewing the terrorists," 201.

3.6.4 Interview structure

3.6.4.1 Inmate interviews

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured outline (see Annex A). The interviews were conducted using a three-pronged approach: an introductory part, a part on the current situation of the participant, and a part on involvement in violent extremism that clustered questions around the three main analytical perspectives used in this study. In the introductory part, the researchers introduced themselves, and explained the purpose of the research is the interview structure. The researchers explained to inmates that they were not affiliated with any state authorities, Malian or otherwise; nor with the correctional/justice system.[348] They introduced themselves as part of an international research group focused on studying individual inmates' experiences in post-conflict countries. Furthermore, to allow the interviewees to provide oral informed consent to participate in the interview, the researchers explained that participation was voluntary and that the confidentiality of the data would be respected.[349] Next, we explained what participation would entail and how the data would be used.[350] Then, we explicitly asked inmates whether they consented to participate in the research project, which all participants did.

During the development of the interview design, certain concerns with interviewing inmates were taken into consideration. As Schlosser[351] argued, the researcher has the responsibility to make sure participants feel comfortable to talk, and understand the questions. Therefore, as a second part of the interview after establishing informed consent, the interview focused on asking non-threatening questions regarding the present situation of the interviewee. This included questions such as: how are you doing today? What have you had for breakfast? What does your daily routine look like? In this first part of the interview, we aimed to make the interviewee feel comfortable and at ease with us.

In the third phase, the interview addressed the narrative of the interviewee, with a specific focus on their narrative prior to being detained. This part went hand-in-hand with gathering essential demographic information from the participant, including name, age and gender, ethnic group, accusation, and sentence. Questions were deliberately phrased broadly; could they explain in their own words what their life looked like before prison? How did they end up here? What group do they associate with and how did they become involved in that specific group? This setup was used because, as Horgan cautions,[352] people are liable to have learned reasons for their involvement during their time in radical or extremist groups that may have little bearing on their actual motives. A standardised list of support questions was constructed but the participants were encouraged to tell their story freely. Thus, asking *how* rather than *why* they became involved with terrorist groups is likely to produce a more revealing and truthful account.[353]

In most cases there was no need to ask additional questions because the participants were articulate and fulsome in sharing their stories. In a few cases, participants were less

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[348] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 8 (2008): 1512.

[349] Ritchie e.a. (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice.* Los Angeles, London: SAGE, p. 87-88.

[350] Seidman (2013) *Interviewing as Qualitateive Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education & The Social Sciences.* New York: Teachers College Press, p. 64.

[351] Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', 1506.

[352] Horgan, "From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalisation into terrorism".

[353] Horgan, 86–87.

articulate or refrained from providing expansive answers. Support questions were drawn from themes in the theoretical chapter, such as the various elements of becoming involved in extremist groups or desisting from extremist environments, including topics such as group dynamics, ideology, and relationships. Using this interview structure, having the exact same structure across all interviews but with room for individual expansion on specific themes, ensured that all participants were exposed to the full range of identical questions, but were able self-select what was relevant to their individual stories. As a result, the answers to this question could provide clues on all levels of the research design: some participants mainly talked about personal (micro level) factors that played a role in their involvement with terrorist groups whereas others mainly attributed their involvement to geopolitical (macro level) factors. This was the most essential part of the interview, as it touched upon the central question of what factors play or might have played a role in– and thus might help us better understand – their involvement in terrorism. This phase also focused on life after prison, asking the inmate what he would like to do upon release. Most, if not all, respondents will eventually be released according to the prison authorities and during our time in the country eight inmates were released.

3.6.4.2 Interviews with professionals

The interviews with professionals provide an understanding of how professionals view involvement in terrorism within the larger Malian context. It allows for a comparison with the perspectives of the inmates and with the literature and as such, adds value to the data gathered in prison and through the literature review. The interview data was used to further nuance and add to the data used to describe the Malian context in chapter four and to provide additional perspectives to the overall research question. Similar to the inmate interviews, the interviews with professionals were also conducted using a semi-structured outline (see Annex B). The outline focused on three overall themes: the situation in Mali generally, terrorism in Mali specifically and finally, reasons for individuals to become involved with terrorist groups. Starting with asking participants what their general assessment was of the situation in Mali provided us with a sense of context to how the individual viewed Mali (both historically, politically as well as in terms of security) and how they themselves related to Mali when it comes to their position and experience.

Thus, the focus group interviews focused more directly on the issue of terrorism in Mali and causes for terrorism or factors that influence involvement in terrorism in the country. Informed consent forms were provided to the focus group participants in printed form, explained plenary and signed by all participants. All interviewees were given the choice to make their contribution anonymous to prevent them from being more cautious in their responses. This provided them with the reassurance to talk freely, without implications for their careers. The interviewees were given a codename in order to maintain anonymity and categorised based on their affiliation. See Annex C for the (anonymised) list of respondents.

In line with the inmate interviews, in most cases there was no need to ask many probing or additional questions as most respondents were very articulate and provided lengthy answers to the main questions. In the focus group interviews with groups of three to eight participants, usually one to three individuals would take the lead in giving answers, but we specifically called upon participants that took a more passive role to provide their answers as well. The risk that individual perceptions of focus group participants would not be included was mitigated through giving the respondents questionnaires asking about the factors that influence involvement in terrorism ahead of the discussion. Regarding the individual interviews, the research team noted that where the Malian participants and international participants working for NGOs/CSOs and embassies were generally very open

and clear, some respondents working for MINUSMA were generally more political in providing answers.

One of the MINUSMA respondents for example, noted that he had to be given formal permission to participate in the interview and when this finally came through, he jokingly said that he had received a list of topics he was not allowed to discuss with us. In another interview with an international respondent working at MINUSMA, the interviewers noted that to some questions, the individual found it very difficult to provide an answer (i.e. to the question to what extent do MINUSMA and the French counter-terrorism force Barkhane cooperate?) – and when the researchers summarised an answer he would say: that is correct but those are not my exact words. As such, the researchers took note of a political bias in some of the respondents' answers but overall; this was only the case in a handful of interviews. As a matter of fact, some international MINUSMA respondents were very explicit in criticising their own organisation or providing a political assessment of the UN's work in Mali.

3.7 Ethical aspects of the research

According to social psychologist Craig Haney: "the effects of incarceration are far-reaching: extended lengths of time spent within prison and the repeated expression of those effects will likely lead to major changes in the way the inmate views himself and his surroundings".[354] Thus, prison presents a difficult and sensitive context to do research of any kind because it deals with vulnerable human subjects. Overcoming assumptions in prison research such as "they will never talk to you", or "they are all liars",[355] proved to be an even greater issue when interviewing terrorist prisoners. Similar to sex offenders, the public discourse generally leans towards viewing these offenders as "evil and sub-human."[356] Nonetheless, this was not so much our experience in Mali, where most professional respondents working directly with these offenders were generally sympathetic to their background, motivations and situation. Given the sensitivity surrounding prison research generally, and specifically related to interviewing terrorists in prison, this paragraph details the steps taken to address any ethical considerations throughout the research.

3.7.1 Data collection

The data used for this research consists of both existing data (such as public aggregate data, government documents and academic sources); as well as empirical data gathered through narrative interviews with inmates and contextual interviews with professionals. The main ethical issues concern the inmate interviews, as that data relates to human subjects in a vulnerable environment. Throughout this study, the research team complied with ICCT's regulations for research ethics including procedures for data collection, protection, retention and destruction.

Existing publicly available aggregate data, such as country reports or specific assessment of the economic or demographic situation of a country are well-documented by agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UNDP, UNICRI, the World Bank, and reports from organisations such as the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS).[357] Other existing data that were

[354] Craig Haney, 'The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment', *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities* 33 (2003): 66.
[355] James B Waldram, 'Challenges of Prison Ethnography', *Anthropology News* 50, no. 1 (January 2009): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.05014.x.
[356] Waldram.
[357] See the International Centre for Prison Studies, http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/mali.

used in this research consist of government data, such as policy plans and documents related to the management and rehabilitation of violent extremist offenders in prison.

As is always the case with research involving human subjects, it was important that the risks for the participants were minimised. The main ethical concerns dealt with questions of anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, data protection, and data sharing, as well as any concerns for impacts on mental health and wellbeing when inmates were asked to discuss their (potentially violent) past. The adopted approach is based on widely used interview tactics in prisons as well as research strategies to interview terrorists or terrorist suspects.[358] The use of interviews regarding terrorism and with (suspected) terrorists posed several privacy and security-related concerns. I followed the guidelines for the use of personal data set out by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science (*Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, KNAW).[359] Safety and security precautions were also taken for the research team – considering interviews would take place one on one with charged and/or convicted offenders in a prison setting where 100% security could not be guaranteed. This translated into participating in a three-day Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) that focused on working in medium to high-risk environments and mitigating risks. Additionally, a series of conversations discussing the ethical and security considerations took place with ICCT's and UNICRI's research team and management, as well as with MINUSMA's Safety and Seucrity Department. Finally, prior to every field trip, a security analysis report was drafted and discussed in an individual meeting with ICCT's Director.

In order to address the central research question, it was necessary to collect some sensitive and personal data. The most important measure taken to ensure the privacy and safety of the individuals discussed in this thesis is to have rendered individuals anonymous and non-identifiable. In accordance with recommendations by other academics who have conducted prison interviews with terrorism,[360] no respondent is referred to by name. In the data collection phase, interviewees were identified using a numerical identification system – the file linking these ID's to the interviewees were kept separately from the interview transcripts. Names were withheld from the analysis and were replaced by pseudonyms. Due to the possibility that a participant's identity may be deduced if significant information regarding criminal charges, associations, geographical locations, or actions were disclosed, all work stemming from this research limited personal information to a very generic nature. All information that can lead to identification of individuals was removed in the transcription process. At no point was the data gathered in the project downloaded or saved to an internal or external unprotected hard drive; it was initially stored on an encrypted flash drive, and later on a university encrypted server where only the principal researchers had access to the data with a password. All researchers gathering or accessing information as part of the project signed non-disclosure agreements.

Furthermore, to ensure adherence to ethical standards, the sensitivity of the prison context was taken into consideration and approval to participate in interviews was acquired from the participants. This was done through establishing oral informed consent at the start of the inmate interviews.[361] This is in line with for example the recommendation of terrorism

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[358] Horgan (2011) Interviewing the terrorists: reflections on fieldwork and implications for psychological research, *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*; Cf. Copes e.a. (2012) Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews, *Field Methods,* 25(2); Schlosser (2008) Issues in Interviewing Inmates. Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(8).

[359] Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Gedragscode Voor Gebruik Van Persoonsgegevens in Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2003).

[360] Speckhard, A. (2009). Research challenges involved in field research and interviews regarding the militant jihad, extremism, and suicide terrorism. *Democracy and Security*, *5*(3), 202.

[361] Schlosser (2008) Issues in Interviewing Inmates. Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(8), p. 1512.

researcher Adam Dolnik, who writes that "in conflict settings, the concept of each interviewee signing a consent form or any other document is completely ludicrous, as it will not only ruin the researcher's credibility due to fears of espionage; being asked to sign documents will automatically trigger fear of manipulation of the signature for fake confessions by government forces."[362] The interviewees were also provided with the opportunity to contact the researchers afterwards in case they had further questions.

3.8 Analysing data

This research aims to explain and understand the phenomenon of involvement in terrorism in Mali *from the inside* and is therefore focused on perception. The data of the narrative interviews were analysed following an inductive approach, or more specifically a constructivist approach – starting from the assumptions that "(1) multiple realities exist, (b) data reflect researchers' and research participants' mutual constructions, and (c) the researcher enters, however incompletely, the participant's world and is affected by it."[363]

This approach was deemed most appropriate for this research as the research question focuses on understanding involvement in terrorism based on inductively coding qualitative interview data based on participants' perspectives on their involvement in terrorism. Terrorism researcher Kate Barrelle, for example, has used the same (inductive coding) approach in her research based on interviews with terrorist offenders.[364] Professor of language and culture Klaus Krippendorff summarises content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use".[365] One should note that inference is the key notion that drives content analysis. As White and Marsh explain: "The researcher uses analytical constructs, or rules of inference, to move from the text to the answers to the research questions."[366] In plainer terms, content analysis is a research approach that looks at the presence of concepts in texts, and subsequently analyses the presence, meaning and relationships of those concepts to make inferences about the message of the text and author. Content analysis approaches a text by breaking it into manageable categories. It does so by labeling, or coding, words phrases, sentences or themes. These categories are designed based on the research question, available theory and a hypothesis. By organising the extraction of concepts from text according to consistent coding, content analysis encourages reliability and uniformity in concept extraction. The following paragraph will elaborate on how the content analysis was conducted.

3.8.1 Thematic content analysis

Using semi-structured narrative interviews as a source, the data from the inmate interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis (TCA). Using professor of psychology Smith's concept of thematic content analysis as a method that "… involves coding or scoring verbal material for content or style for the purpose of making inferences

[362] Adam Dolnik, (2011). Conducting field research on terrorism: A brief primer. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *5*(2), 9.
[363] Kathy Charmaz and Liska Belgrave, 'Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis', *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* 2 (2012): 324.
[364] Barrelle, Kate. 'Pro-integration: disengagement from and life after extremism.' *Behavioural sciences of terrorism and political aggression*, (2015) *7*(2), 129-142.
[365] Krippendorff 2004)
[366] White and Marsh (2006)

about, or assessing, the characteristics or experiences of persons, social groups, or historical periods."[367]

At the heart of content analysis as a research methodology is the acknowledgment of the importance of language in human cognition.[368] The analysis of text or narratives builds on the assumption that the researcher can understand other people's cognitive schemas.[369] The interpretation is aimed at looking at beings: uncovering an essence that manifests itself in the phenomena and is therefore aimed at the phenomenon as it hides behind its appearance. The research is thus not focused on quantification, but on the exploration of the structure of the phenomenon. Additionally, TCA assumes that groups of words reveal underlying themes.[370] The *thematic* part of content analysis refers to the importance of identifying relatively comprehensive units of analysis within the analysis of story like material such as themes.[371] The purpose of TCA is to arrive at an interpretation and identify patterns across an entire dataset.

This study adopted a two-phased approach. In the first phase, a thematic content analysis of the inmate interviews was conducted through reading through the interview notes and *coding* the emerging themes for the entire dataset. This involved an initial coding process selecting comments that relate to the main research question of how we can understand involvement in terrorism in Mali, and putting them into containers that are called *nodes* in the software program used. These nodes are assigned a label selected by the research to reflect the statement, for example if a participant talked about how the financial benefits provided by a terrorist group, that specific statement would be selected as a node and labelled as *financial benefits* and another node would be assigned to the statement labelled with the specific terrorist group the participant was talking about. This phase is characterised as an inductive phase, allowing the data to speak for itself rather than approaching the data from a theoretical perspective.

After developing a list of nodes, the next step included reviewing the nodes and grouping them together under similar themes. This is a more focused coding phase using the most frequent and/or significant initial codes to sort, synthesise, and conceptualise the dataset.[372] Nvivo, a specialized content analysis software program,[373] was used to assist in the ordering of nodes into larger themes and domains. For example, when prison respondents talked about engaging with terrorist groups because these groups threatened to kill them or their family if they did not cooperate, this was coded as *protection* or *protection of family members*. Going from codes to themes included for example grouping both nodes under the theme *immediate survival*. For example, when respondents talked about the absence of state

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[367] Charles P. Smith et al., *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[368] Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Mit Press, 2012); Ruth Wodak and Paul Chilton, *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory, Methodology and Interdisciplinarity* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2005).

[369] Robert Gephart, 'Hazardous Measures: An Interpretive Textual Analysis of Quantitative Sensemaking during Crises', *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 18, no. S1 (1 November 1997): 583–622, https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199711)18:1+<583::AID-JOB908>3.0.CO;2-T; Eric Woodrum, '"Mainstreaming" Content Analysis in Social Science: Methodological Advantages, Obstacles, and Solutions', *Social Science Research* 13, no. 1 (1 March 1984): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1016/0049-089X(84)90001-2.

[370] Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth, 'Qualitative Analysis of Content', *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* 308 (2009): 319; Robert Philip Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (Sage, 1990).

[371] Ole R. Holsti, 'Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities', *Reading. MA: Addison-Wesley (Content Analysis)*, 1969.

[372] Charmaz and Belgrave, 'Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis', 356.

[373] NVivo is a software package to aid qualitative data analysis designed by QSR that "helps capture, manage, explore and understand data" (2013). Its full title is NUD.IST Vivo.

services such as water or education, this was grouped under the theme *lack of services*. The third and final step in the coding process entailed converging the themes into larger domains that characterise common factors that played a role in the involvement with terrorist groups. In total, these seven domains that were identified through the coding process are *state-citizen relationships, survival, foreign influence, societal tensions, economic opportunities, ideology*, and *lack of information*. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the domains with their corresponding themes.

Throughout the analysis, some themes were re-defined and re-labelled to more accurately represent the answers of the participants. In the case of all reasons for involvement that were related to the Malian government, I first labelled the domain as *Bad governance*. However, I struggled with where to include the theme of *identity* as I felt it would fit both in the domain of *ideology* as well as feeling it had something to do with citizenship and government. In the end, after re-reading the quotes and codes I assigned, I decided that most statements related to whether the respondents felt like they were Malian citizens and if that was not the case it often directly related to the role of the Malian government. As such I decided to group the theme identity under the domain *Bad governance* and in turn I decided to re-label the domain as *State-citizenship relationships* to better reflect the three constituent themes. Additionally, I provided a definition for every theme and domain to clarify how I perceive of the domains and themes.

Table 3.2 – Content Anaysis Results: Domains and themes

Involvement with terrorist groups	**Domains**	**Themes**
	State-citizenship relationships	Institutional capabilities
		Political responsibilities
		Identity
	Survival	Immediate survival
		Long-term survival strategies
	Foreign influence	Direct influence neighbouring countries
		International actors
		Foreign jihadist influence
	Societal tensions	North vs South
		Lack of community
		Lack of mutual understanding
		Ethnic tensions
	Economic opportunities	Economic benefits
		Economic challenges
	Ideology	Religion / Azawad
	Lack of information	Lack of education / information

Assessing the coded data together with the short summaries of the nodes, notes were made of possible relationships between themes based on the interpretation of the interview data. For example, when considering inmate participant statements relating to involvement in terrorism, relevant parts from all interviews were coded as *reasons to join jihadist group* and a short summary was written to describe that specific node. The theme of lack of *basic services* (which was related to some participants' motivation to collaborate with terrorist groups) was identified from this node and thus initial themes were formulated that in the end led to a larger domain labelled as *bad governance*. Finally, Smith recommends using extracts from at least three participants for every theme as well as a measure of prevalence of themes, or extracts from half the sample for every domain.[374] On average, between two and four

[374] Jonathan A. Smith, 'Evaluating the Contribution of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', *Health Psychology Review* 5, no. 1 (2011): 17.

extracts are provided for each of the sixteen themes in the results section in chapter 6, thus well satisfying Smith's criteria.

Building on the theoretical framework, the final step in the analysis was to move from the inductive approach to reflecting on the findings in light of the academic literature. In this phase, the themes were analysed to determine on what level of analysis they were situated – i.e. on the micro (personal), the meso (group), the macro (structural) level, or whether they were better viewed as a combination of levels. This was done to assess what levels were most prominent in the respondents' narratives of their involvement and to reflect on the academic body of literature explaining involvement in terrorism. Thus, the second phase ended with a (theory-driven) deductive analysis of the themes along the lines of the multi-level theoretical explanations for involvement in terrorism as laid out in chapter two.

The interview data (written notes of all interviews) that resulted from the interviews with the 75 professionals were used to contextualise the results from the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists. The data was analysed to identify the main themes that participants agreed played a role in conflict and terrorism in Mali. This was done similarly to the use of TCA for the inmate interviews with the difference that the interview data was not coded and no software was used to aid the analysis. This was a consequence of the fact that part of the professional data was gathered as part of the project that ICCT and UNICRI were implementing (i.e. the focus group interviews with prison staff) and was originally not intended to be used for this thesis. As such, the professional interviews did not take place in the same structured manner, following the exact same interview guideline, nor did I transcribe all interview data to the same level of detail as the inmate interviews. That is why instead, for the professional interviews, four overall themes were inductively identified through an analysis of the notes of the interviews. These themes were: (1) the general (security) situation in Mali that reflected on the current state of affairs in the country; (2) the role of international actors in Mali (main actors and type of plus rationale for involvement in the country); (3) the terrorism situation in Mali; and (4) factors that drive indiviudals to engage with terrorist groups or become involved with terrorism. Next, their perspectives were compared and contrasted both with the inmates' perspectives as well as with the academic literature.

3.9 Dilemmas and considerations

3.9.1 Considerations related to the narrative approach

When using narrative interviews to gather knowledge you always deal with layered realities. In other words: the reality presented by the respondent reflects the perspective, experiences and values of the person presenting the information. While the reality is shaped and presented as a narrative by that individual, it is interpreted in turn by the specific disciplinary lenses of those who research it, whether from a sociological, criminological, psychological, or political science point of view. As such, the empirical data or knowledge gathered through interviews in essence creates a joint vision of the reality of – in this case – involvement in terrorism as the phenomenon that is studied. Ultimately, it is up to reader to in turn recognise this layered reality and its diversity, and to interpret the knowledge presented to improve our understanding. As Taylor and Horgan[375] put it:

[375] M. Taylor and J. Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585–601

> an under-explored alternative to an account in terms of individual qualities is to see involvement in terrorism, at least in psychological terms, as a process rather than a state; this implies a focus not on the individual and their presumed psychological or moral qualities, but on process variables such as the changing context that the individual operates in, and also the relationships between events and the individual as they affect behaviour

In prison, there is the added layer of the prison life or prison reality. This prison reality involves the impact of the prison environment on the self, any changes this has brought about and the process of meaning-making of all of this. This involves what Sykes has labelled the 'pains of imprisonment'- or the prison experience as a form of psychological survival.[376] Examples include the potential abusive dimension of power and authority structures in the prison environment – as researched by Zimbardo and Milgram through socio-psychological experiments.[377] Another (related) example of the prison reality includes what Toch (studying prison from an environmental psychological perspective) labeled the 'transactional element of prison'; how the prison environment is perceived and how individuals negotiate with that environment.[378]

All these elements impact this research, and do not solely pertain to the inmate interviews. There is always a transactional element in conducting interviews in the sense that it raises questions such as: why do the respondents participate in this research project, what is in it for them – or: what are the consequences if they choose not to participate? Here, for the inmate participants factors such as curiosity, spending some time outside of a congested prison cell, power structures in the prison cell (orders from a cell leader or fellow inmates) and psychological survival (what is the consequence for me if I refuse to cooperate with prison staff) are likely to play a role. Refusing to participate in the research might not even be a realistic option for (some of the) participants. For the professional respondents, some factors are similar (for example curiosity or power stuctures within an organization) while other factors could also play a role (i.e. wanting to share one's perspective, strengthening professional relationships).

Especially the nature of the prison environment of those who are labeled as terrorists is important. It is likely that this environment increases the effect of group pressure (given ideological and group linkages) and reinforces the existing power structures both within the cell as well as vis-à-vis larger prison environment (in terms of how the 'terrorists' are viewed by the other inmates). Additionaly, the high-risk nature of this offender population, which requires more from prison staff to manage security, makes prison staff partially dependent on the cooperation of these inmates.

Then, there is the limitation of the influence that the researcher has on the narrative that is being shared. This automatically poses the question, in the words of criminologists Liem and Maruna, "just whose story is this"?[379] To what extent does the researcher, in this study the primary audience for the respondents, influence the story of the interviewee? When doing

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376 Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

377 Stanley Milgram, 'Group Pressure and Action against a Person.', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 69, no. 2 (1964): 137; Philip G. Zimbardo et al., *Stanford Prison Experiment* (Zimbardo, Incorporated, 1971).

378 Hans Toch, *Living in Prison: The Ecology of Survival.* (Free Press, 1977).

379 Shadd Maruna and Marieke Liem (2020). Where Is This Story Going? A Critical Analysis of the Emerging Field of Narrative Criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, *4*.

fieldwork, from a narrative perspective it is assumed that the participants that were interviewed answered and behaved and responded in a unique way that is different from when anyone else would or might have interviewed them. Partially this is the result of the character of the interivews as a research project and as such, a novel or an a-typical experience for both the inmates and the professionals. Partially, it is the outcome of the constitutive character of these narratives that is shaped by both the researcher(s) and the participants. Additionally, the specific questions, the order and the formulation of those questions by any researcher introduce bias into an interview, particularly when questions or answers are sensitive and personal.

Finally, a consideration of this research is that using content analysis as a method creates its own obstacles in terms of reliability. It is limited by its reliance on the available records of source materials. In this case, because the interviews were not audio-recorded, the reader has to rely on the notes and interpretation of the researcher. In that way, while certain objects of study can rely on a rich source of registered data for researchers to analyze (think for example of data such as records of parliamentary debates, speeches by politicians, ideologies of dictators), other phenomena – including narratives of involvement in terrorism may be less well documented. Additionally, maybe even more so with regard to participants reflecting on their own experiences of involvement in terrorism, respondents may be inclined to only reveal specific elements of their personal lives and can provide a selection of information rather than the entire story; this is likely to be even more the case when interviewing inmates that have not been sentenced yet.

This part (the group element in the prison context) also undoubtedly has a large impact on the individual narratives, given that the ideological part of terrorism already involves a larger group narrative. And specific narratives of involvement are likely to be influenced by fellow group members both during membership of a terrorist group outside of prison as well as by fellow inmates during time spent in prison. This intra-group influence can take the form of coordination (sticking to the message, communicating similar attitudes on specific terrorist groups or regarding the treatment by external actors such as Barkhane, the Malian police, or prison staff). But it can also take on a more subtle role where it may lead to individual inmates amplifying or sprucing up their narratives to gain or improve status, to satisfy a need to belong i.e. by claiming to be part of similar networks or groups or by adhering to same beliefs; or to resistance, by disagreeing with another inmate’s narrative or a group narrative.

Nonetheless, in my opinion the value of the narrative approach to involvement in terrorism is that it advances beyond the oft-discussed notion of a ‘terrorist personality’ and instead, zooms in on the constructed realities of alleged terrorist offenders and professionals working in the field of terrorism. Given that this thesis follows the notion that we live in a storied world, the qualitiative analysis of these narratives holds great value – especially for topics that do not lend themselves for easy access for researchers such as involvement in terrorism. It allows us to deconstruct those narrative constructions and categorize and analyse its constitutive elements. Specifically, I found that narrative interviews with indiviudals who are or who were formerly involved with terrorist groups provide useful avenues to analyse the attitudes, intentions and behaviour of these indiviudals as well as how these relate to the meso-level processes and dynamics of the groups to which they belong(ed). Gaining access to and conducting interviews with (suspected) terrorists is a costly and time-intensive endeavor, often posing an insurmountable challenge to researchers aiming to obtain sample sizes that are sufficiently large to conduct relevant and significant quantitative analysis. In light of this, despite implications for representative samples and thus – the potential to

generalize the findings, individual interviews can aid in providing us with a deeper understanding of involvement in terrorism.

As long as researchers are aware of the biases associated with this type of research and the implications are clearly accounted for, I would agree with with Altier and Horgan,[380] who argue that

> terrorist autobiographies and statements, we argue, consistent with Cordes, reflect the best, and often only, insider perspective on terrorist life and thinking. They provide insights into the ways in which current and former terrorists perceive themselves, what they believe they are doing (or did in the past), and what they think their actions will (or did) accomplish

Despite the many obstacles involved, I experienced that interviews allowed me to built and maintain a certain level of rapport with the respondents and ask focused questions centered on specific events or decisions in their lives. By letting (suspected) terrorists 'speak for themselves', the narrative starting point improves the chance that the information gathered provides sound and important desciriptions of the experiences, perspectives and points of view of those who became involved in terrorism. It also increases the potential for a reliable reflection of the interviewees' perceptions of their own mindsets and process of meaning-making at that particular point in time.

3.9.2 Considerations related to the methodology

The chosen methodology also comes with clear limitations. One is the representativeness of interviews. Because the inmate interviews were limited to 30 individuals (out of a population of over 200), the author essentially utilised *opportunity sampling*, 'interviewing only those who happened to be accessible and who were willing to talk'.[381] This means that it is difficult to assess how representative the analysis of this data is for the group (of suspected and/or sentenced terrorists) at large. An additional dilemma in the use of interviews for research purposes is the issue of reliability. As argued above, the influence of the prison context and the *on remand* nature of the majority of the inmate respondents cannot be overestimated. Thus, even though interviews can provide us with a unique understanding of the object of study; the problems addressed above emphasize the need for a perspective towards the data and the related outcomes of this study. In the conclusion further attention will be paid to these limitations.

For content analysis, reliability and validity can also be limited due to choices I made in the process of defining, conceptualizing and operationalizing the research questions and terms, and in measuring and analysing key variabes. In this research, this was mitigated through discussions ahead of the analysis phase on the overall approach to coding data to increase the chance that an individual coder will code the same data in the same way at other moments as well as the likelihood that another individual would code the data in the same way.

One of the main limitiations in adopting a narrative approach is that when interviewing people, there is a high likelihood of individuals portraying their lives and actions in the most favourable light possible. Especialy terrorists might have strong

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[380] Altier, M. B., Horgan, J., & Thoroughgood, C. (2012). In their own words? Methodological considerations in the analysis of terrorist autobiographies. *Journal of strategic security*, *5*(4), p. 90.
[381] Silke, "The Devil You Know," 8.

motivations to hide important details of their background or to deliberately use a narrative for political purposes. In what is often referred to as 'hindsight bias',[382] there is thus a risk that the participants, including the professionals, sensationalize events; and rationalize their actions and their own choices.

Nonetheless, in that light it is striking how many personal experiences and biographical facts the participants were willing to share. Other concerns related to the vulnerable environment and newness of the type of interview are likely to have played a role in the responses of the inmates. These issues are an inherent part of research using primary sources through interviews and these aspects were taken ito account both in the data-gathering process as well as throughout the analytical phase. Even though the research interest is in the phenomenon of involvement in terrorism, it was not always easy for participants to speak openly about their experiences with or within terrorist groups without first having shared their broader background with us, which often felt like setting the stage for understanding the critical importance how and why they did in the end become involved with specific groups. In fact, participants often made a point of emphasising the importance of explaining their background and specific experiences prior to their involvement with terrorist groups as contextual backdrop to their engagement stories.

All in all, this research demonstrates the uniqueness of the individual process of becoming involved in terrorism; because (1) the individuals that did become involved with terrorism and terrorist groups are unique personalities; (2) the circumstances within which they became involved vary per individual; and (3) their personal interpretation of these circumstances and their own role in that larger environment provides us with their personal narratives of their own process of involvement. At the same time, this research also points towards the striking similarities in involvement within the research sample (as well as the overlap and agreement in the understanding of this process by both the inmate as well as the professional interviewees). While the acknowledgement of the unique character of involvement is nothing new, the more interesting question lies in how – despite this nuance – we can analyse and identify the commonalities in this process and what the implications are of these commonalities for our understanding of involvement in terrorism and our policies to address terrorism.

This research has traced involvement as a set of pathways that are ultimately defined by an individual process of meaning-making – where terrorist groups respond to both very practical needs (for security, income and basic services) as well as to more transcendental needs (for revenge, brotherhood, inclusion and a sense of significance, whether it be through religion, definance or autonomy). The narrative approach to involvement helps us to value the complexities of this process, as well as common themes that emerge when different narratives are compared contrasted. Last but not least, given that as researchers, most of our findings are communicated in narrative form – the products of our analysis – need to be interpreted and accepted by the reader just as much as the stories we study.[383] Luckily, stories have always been more gripping than abstract scientific models.

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[382] Bonnie Cordes, "When Terrorists Do the Talking: Reflections on Terrorist Literature," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): 150–171.

[383] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*, 1.